

The Documentary Renaissance

By Rudy Buttignol

**The documentary is dead!
Long live the documentary!**

The point-of-view documentary is experiencing a renaissance on television and cinema screens around the world. Yearly Top 10 lists regularly include documentaries; others are winners at the box office; still others top the TV ratings. Even *E.R.* "went documentary" for its record-breaking season debut this year.

Way back in 1984, the nascent Canadian Independent Film Caucus organized a panel at Toronto's Festival of Festivals called "The Death of the Documentary." Drastic times called for a drastic title. Various called the point-of-view, *auteur*, creative or feature documentary, this filmmaker-driven form appeared doomed by the creeping presence of television journalism. News documentaries, particularly at CBC-TV, threatened to squeeze out the independent documentary producer. Things looked bad.

Looking back, the desperation seems a distant memory of a far-away universe. This past December, I attended the fifth forum for the International Co-Financing of Documentaries, in Amsterdam, where at least 40 commissioning editors from around the world were looking to buy and sell documentaries. For three nonstop days, we sat around a horseshoe-shaped conference table and heard 60 pitches, almost all for the ever-threatened point-of-view documentary.

Despite the rise of specialty services with their voracious appetite for new and inexpensive programming, the action around the table was largely dominated by public or publicly mandated broadcasters. In general, the pitches were for single, one-off, hour and feature-length documentaries. Many of the subjects proposed were either controversial in content or challenging in form. All reflected the interests and passions of the director; that is, the director as *auteur*, without whom there would be no film. The affinity these *auteurs* have for public television is clear: the alternative is a commercial environment—not a great place for films without narration; or

whose story line takes time to build with an audience; or whose daring or provocative content makes advertising sales departments nervous.

Far from dying, the point-of-view documentary has found new vitality, a larger audience and a natural home in public broadcasting. TVO, for example, has commissioned and broadcast some incredibly difficult, "dangerous" documentaries and has weathered its share of storms in the process. TVO received death and bomb threats when it aired Michael Ignatieff's provocative series *Blood and Belonging* during the war in the former Yugoslavia.

A shining example of the way public television has changed was the broadcast, last year on TVO, of that classic of *cinéma vérité*, Allan King's *Warrendale*. This raw, compassionate film about emotionally disturbed children received its television premiere a full 30 years after it was commissioned and then banned by the CBC because of its controversial, hard-edged language and emotionally harrowing subject matter.

King agreed to the TVO broadcast only because there would be no commercial interruptions. Most filmmakers cherish the same opportunity to showcase their work to audiences in their uncut, commercial-free form. In *Confessions of a Rabid Dog*, John L'Ecuyer's prose narration and hallucinogenic imagery draws the viewer into the nightmarish world of heroin addiction. Breaking into the middle of this hell for a commercial break could only diminish the dark mood and undermine the message.

Challenging television isn't just about content. Kevin McMahon's *In the Reign of Twilight*, about the Cold War's effect on Arctic cultures, is a formal attempt at expanding the visual language of the viewer. It's always going to be tough to make films that challenge the status quo. But they'll continue to get made as long as there are filmmakers who have a passion for a story that needs telling. It's true, there has been an increased opportunity for the creative documentary in "televisionland."

There has never been a better time for documentaries. This is renaissance. ■



Above: Allan King's *Warrendale*.

Below: John L'Ecuyer's *Confessions of a Rabid Dog*.

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